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A NOTE ON *ROMEO AND JULIET*, II, i, 1-2

Can I go forward when my heart is here?
Turn back, dull earth, and find thy centre out.

The explanations of this passage given by the editors are hardly adequate. Furness' *Variorum* quotes the following from Clarke and Singer respectively:

Dull earth. Romeo's epithet for his small world of man, the earthlier portion of himself.

This seems to be one of the many instances of Shakespeare's apparent intuitive feeling for correcter scientific views than were current in his day. The idea suggested is of the earth—symbol of the earthly body—at its aphelion, or the point of its orbit most remote from the sun, returning to it by the force of gravitation to the common center of gravity.

Other commentators give no other comment of importance; yet the passage is not clear without further explanation.

Romeo is thinking of the theory that the center of the earth is the point of attraction for all heavy or earthy bodies, contrary to light or fiery bodies, which tend to move upward. If a hole should be driven through the center of the earth from circumference to circumference, any object dropped from either side would eventually come to rest at the center. It might be forcibly impelled beyond this center at first, but, if so, would be drawn back finally to this resting place. For Romeo, the center to which he is irresistibly attracted is Juliet; he starts to pass by the grounds of the Capulets where she is, but is drawn back to them.

That the theories as to the center of the earth given above were common property in the sixteenth century is shown by the following passages from Erasmus' "Problema," one of the *Colloquies*, given here in the translation by Bailey (ed. 1900), which furnish an excellent commentary on the lines of the play:

Curio: What then is the natural center of heavy Bodies? and on the other hand, of light Bodies?

Alphius: All heavy Things are by a natural Motion carried towards the Earth, and light Things towards Heaven: I do not speak of a violent or animal Motion. . . .

Curio: If any God should bore thro' the Center of the Earth quite down to the Antipodes, in a perpendicular Line, and as Cosmographers use to represent the Situation of the Globe of the Earth, and a Stone were let fall into it, whither would it go?

Alphius: To the Center of the Earth; there all heavy Bodies rest. . . . But a Stone, if it did pass the Center with so violent a Motion, would at first go more heavily, and return to the Center again, just as a Stone thrown up into the Air returns again to the Earth.

Curio: But returning back again by its natural Motion, and again recovering Force, it would go beyond the Center, and so the Stone would never rest.

Alphius: It would lie still at last by running beyond, and then running back again until it came to an Equilibrium. . . .

Curio: But what is it that makes a Body heavy or light?

Alphius: That's a question fit for God to answer, why he made Fire the lightest of all Things, and Air next to that; the Earth the heaviest, and Water next to that. . . .

Curio: Do you think, then, that whatsoever has most of a fiery Quality in it is lightest, and that which has most of an earthy Quality heaviest?

Alphius: You are right.

Romeo refers to himself deprecatingly as "dull earth," as being composed mainly of the dull, heavy element, instead of all four elements mixed in due proportion. Compare Prospero's "Thou earth," used of Caliban, and also *Richard III*, III, iv, 78, "Thou little better thing than earth." The words are not to be understood as referring to the globe, as Singer and others take it. This confusion has been caused largely by the word "thy," which seems to refer directly to "earth." What Romeo means by the phrase "thy centre" is "what is *for thee* the centre"; to *him* Juliet is the attraction toward which he is drawn as heavy, earthy bodies to the center of the globe.

Perhaps the nearest parallel to these lines to be found in Shakespeare is *Troilus and Cressida*, IV, ii, 109-11:

But the strong base and building of my love
Is as the very centre of the earth,
Drawing all things to it.

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